

don't dream it's over by fakelight

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Carol (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Nancy Wheeler, Robin (Stranger Things), Steve Harrington, Tommy H. (Stranger Things), Will Byers

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler (past), Steve Harrington/Robin (Stranger Things)

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-06-10

Updated: 2018-08-12

Packaged: 2022-04-23 02:26:54

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 6

Words: 16,427

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

“And what about you, how are you? Are you uh, seeing anyone?”

Later, Nancy will blame many things for the words that come out of her mouth—the wine, Carol, her precarious emotional state—but even as she says them, she knows they will be impossible to take back.

“Actually yeah, I am.”

What has she *done*?

1. try to catch the deluge in a paper cup

Attending her ex-boyfriend's wedding alone may not be the stupidest thing Nancy Wheeler has ever done, but it's close.

It was meant to be a statement, attending the wedding at all, crossing out the plus one on the invite, traveling all the way back to Hawkins, where her parents don't even *live* anymore. But as Nancy steps off the plane, she can feel the pit in her stomach, the one that says, *this is the worst idea you have ever had*.

She pushes the pit down, takes a deep breath, and goes to find her luggage.

For some inexplicable reason, she's been invited to the rehearsal dinner, a tiny slip of a note in her invitation, perhaps by virtue of arriving early from out of town, or maybe Steve just wants to get the introduction out of the way before the actual wedding.

She's never met his fiancée, but it's a wedding. Nancy's going to have to meet her eventually.

Might as well get it over with.

The first person she sees (*of course*) as she walks into the restaurant is

Carol, who mutters something to Tommy before walking over with what Nancy knows to be a fake smile on her face.

“Nancy Wheeler, what brings you back to Hawkins? I thought you were too big for our little town?”

Nancy plasters a matching smile on her face, even as she remembers exactly why she left Hawkins in the first place. “I was invited, Carol. Although I didn’t realize you were *close* enough for the rehearsal dinner?”

Carol lets out a simpering laugh. “Tommy’s a groomsman, I’m just tagging along. Are *you* bringing anyone?” she asks, looking around, her tone implying she knows Nancy’s here by herself.

“Oh, um,” Nancy begins, but Carol cuts her off.

“I mean, it must be so hard finding someone who can live up to all of your *demands*, I mean, *dreams*.”

Nancy blinks, the smile on her face turning brittle. She knows Steve would have unburdened himself after the breakup, but she should have expected this, should have realized there would be an ambush. She shouldn’t have come alone.

“It was great to see you again, Carol,” she says, cutting off the conversation, only sort of trying to hide the sarcasm as she walks away.

It doesn’t end with Carol.

Steve’s mother, his grandmother, his *cousins*, everyone mingling, all incredibly interested in Nancy and how she’s *doing*, and if she *brought anyone*, Nancy stammering out vague responses.

She should have prepared for this. Made up a boyfriend sick with the flu back in New York, or in the Peace Corps, or Canadian, unable to cross the border for some reason. Anything would be better than having to admit that she came alone to her ex-boyfriend’s wedding, as a matter of principle, yes, but also because she hasn’t dated *anyone* since she broke up with Steve last year.

And then she sees Steve.

Their eyes meeting across the room, his arm wrapped around someone that has to be Robin.

It's easier than she thought it would be.

And harder, all at the same time.

Nancy manages a weak smile, one that Steve returns. The hand resting on Robin's waist lifts in a wave.

She needs some air.

It's started raining.

Of course it has.

Nancy stands just under the awning to the restaurant, letting her hair frizz up, letting the raindrops splash onto her toes. Breathing in and out, wishing she hadn't left her wine inside, or that she'd stopped after the fourth glass, she's not sure which.

"Fuck," she half-shouts, at life, at her choices.

Maybe she shouldn't have come at all.

"Everything okay?" an unfamiliar voice asks.

Nancy turns to find a stranger tucked into the shadows, smoking a cigarette, looking at her with concern.

She blinks, flustered. “Oh, no, yeah. Everything’s . . . ” She pauses, trying to find a way to describe her situation. “Fine.”

The stranger smiles wryly at the emotion she packs into the word. “Anything I can do to help?”

Nancy begins to turn him down, then reconsiders. Nodding at his cigarette, she says, “Can I get one of those?” She’s not normally a smoker, but if there was ever a time, it’s now.

He frowns, his nose wrinkling. “It’s, ah, my last one. But?” He holds it out to her.

Nancy looks at him, considering.

Finally she breathes, “Fuck it,” and takes a drag. Lets out a deep sigh of relief.

The stranger laughs.

“Thanks,” she says, handing it back to him, and as he leans back against the wall, gestures to herself. “Nancy.”

“Jonathan.”

She nods at him, looking back out at the parking lot. The rain starts to fall harder.

“Should I ask?”

Nancy huffs out a mirthless chuckle. “Probably not.” She puts her head in her hands. “Oh god, what am I *doing* here? I shouldn’t have come, I should have *never* come back, I can’t believe I have to deal with these *people* all *weekend*.”

“Bride or groom?” he asks, and the perfunctory curiosity of someone who doesn’t know her history with Steve—with this town—is so refreshing that Nancy laughs out loud.

“Groom,” she tells him. “About as groom as you can get. What about you?”

“Neither,” Jonathan shrugs. “Or, both. Kind of? I don’t actually know anyone in there, except for the bride, and I’ve only met her once. I’m just waiting until they need me.”

She tilts her head in confusion at the statement, but before she can ask him to clarify, she hears from behind her, “Nance?”

Nancy swallows. Turns.

“Hi.”

Steve looks good, better than the last time she saw him in person, although that wouldn’t take much—almost anything is better than tears and screaming.

He pauses for a second, a vague smile on his face, almost rueful. “I didn’t think you were actually gonna come.”

Nancy shrugs. “Here I am.”

Steve nods. “Yeah.”

They stand in silence for a few moments, Nancy breaking it before it goes on too long. “Everyone’s told me you’re doing really great—she’s really great—I’m . . . I’m really happy for you.”

Steve smiles, a real smile this time, one that lights up his entire face. “Yeah, she’s . . . yeah. She’s amazing.”

Nancy smiles back. “That’s great,” she says, meaning it, and even though it’s awkward, so awkward, it’s manageable. She thinks maybe coming back was a good idea, that the closure provided was, in the end, worth it.

Until Steve asks the question, the one she’s been asked too many times to count.

“And what about you, how are you? Are you uh, seeing anyone?”

Later, Nancy will blame many things for the words that come out of her mouth—the wine, Carol, her precarious emotional state—but even as she says them, she knows they will be impossible to take

back.

“Actually yeah, I am.”

What has she *done*?

“Oh.” Steve sounds surprised. “My mom—she was saying . . . ” He shakes his head. “That’s great, Nance. I’m . . . happy for you too. I’d love to meet him.”

Just kidding, Nancy wants to say. *Just wanted to see your reaction.*

Instead, what comes out of her mouth, even as she thinks *stop*, *what are you doing*, is, “Well, you won’t have to wait too long.”

She watches as her hand extends toward Jonathan, the man she met literally *minutes* ago, hears herself say, “Steve, this is Jonathan,” makes herself meet his eyes as Jonathan’s head cocks in confusion, pleading silently, *please, just go with it*.

To his credit, Jonathan barely skips a beat. He drops the cigarette on the ground, grinding it out as he leans forward, placing his arm around Nancy’s waist in the same movement as his other hand extends towards Steve. “Jonathan Byers.”

“Steve Harrington,” Steve replies automatically, before his eyes narrow and flick to Nancy and then back to Jonathan, shaking his head from side to side, once, twice.

His eyebrows knit together.

“Wait,” he says, slowly, and Nancy holds her breath, sure the ruse will end before it even begins.

“You’re dating my photographer?”

Nancy feels like she’s going to faint.

She feels Jonathan’s hand tighten around her waist, almost like he can tell, like he’s trying to hold her up.

(Or he’s warning her that he’s about to walk away, she’s not really

sure.)

Steve is still looking at her expectantly, and after the silence drags on for far too long, Nancy says, lightly, hesitantly, “Yes,” her tone landing somewhere between statement and question.

“That’s so crazy.” Steve shakes his head. “How did you guys even meet?” But before Nancy can even try to come up with a plausible explanation, Steve answers his own question. “Oh, New York, of course.”

Nancy presses her lips together, turning her head to meet Jonathan’s gaze, and this time Jonathan’s the one to answer, his “Yes,” even less confident than Nancy’s, his eyes locked on hers.

“Great, that’s great,” Steve repeats. He seems to mean it, and Nancy feels a twinge of guilt at her subterfuge, but her sense of self-preservation keeps her tucked into Jonathan’s side.

“So I’d better, uh,” he nods toward the door, “get back, but, uh, good to meet you.”

Jonathan nods.

Nancy does the same, counting the seconds until Steve leaves, even as she knows that the conversation she’s about to have will be one for the ages.

“And,” Steve turns back, hanging onto the door frame, saying to Jonathan, “I think we’re gonna start the speeches soon, so . . . “

“Got it,” Jonathan confirms, waiting for the last glimpse of hair to disappear, before turning to Nancy, stepping back, his steadying presence at her side disappearing, Nancy strangely finding herself missing it, even as she knows she doesn’t deserve to feel that way.

“Okay—”

“I am, so, so sorry,” Nancy breathes.

“Yeah . . . ” he trails off, and she blanches, her anguish swallowing up the rest of her apology. “I mean . . . so that’s clearly your ex,

right?” he says, offering her an opening.

“Yes.” Nancy swallows. “And you’re the wedding photographer.”

Jonathan nods at her, an expression on his face that could be apprehension or amusement. “So, what—”

Nancy cuts him off. “I’m so sorry,” she says again, because she can’t say it enough times. “I don’t know what I was *thinking*, it’s just that his *mother*, and everyone in this fucking *town*, it’s like they were all *waiting* for me to come back, tail between my legs for *dumping* him, and I just . . . with everyone else I could fake my way through it, but then he was right there . . . and *you* were *right there*, and I’m *so sorry* and if you give me five minutes I will march in there and pretend you dumped me because I didn’t tell you about Steve, just give it a second for it to spread around so people won’t get confused, because it *will*, I *promise* you, and then you can spend the rest of the evening taking truly *awful* pictures of me, which I *absolutely* deserve.”

Jonathan blinks as she catches her breath. His gaze is sympathetic, and Nancy hopes against hope it means the photographs taken of her won’t be *too* unflattering.

“I think you would have told me about Steve, though, right?” he muses. “If we’ve been dating for—how long have we been dating?”

Nancy’s mouth drops open. She stammers for a second, before finally choking out, “What?”

He shrugs. “I did offer to help.”

“Yeah, but this is—this is beyond . . . are you serious?”

Jonathan laughs at the expression on her face, shrugging again. “I’ve been there, *trust* me. And like I said, I don’t know anyone here, so it’s not like I’ve got anything to lose—and it seems like you do.”

Nancy feels tears prick at her eyes, perhaps from the wine, or perhaps because someone she just met is being kinder to her than all of the people inside the restaurant, people she’d grown up with, people whom, before she left, she’d considered almost family.

“Plus,” he goes on, hurriedly, as Nancy blinks the tears away, “weddings are boring. I could use someone to talk to.”

She frowns at him. “Is there lots of time for conversation? Shouldn’t you, I don’t know, be taking pictures or something?”

“My contract doesn’t officially start until 8, and it is,” he checks his watch, “7:55 on the dot. So, no.” His head tilts. “I’ve got nothing better to do for the next five minutes. Except talk to my girlfriend of . . . five months? Seven?”

Nancy eyes him warily, but his face is open, genuine, and she thinks he may actually want to help her, for no other reason than she needs it. For the second time that evening, Nancy says, “Fuck it,” but this time it’s accompanied by a grateful smile. “How about six?”

Jonathan grins. “Six months it is.”

They stand in silence for a few moments, Nancy letting the enormity of what she’s about to embark on wash over her. She’s going to lie to everyone she knows. And she’s going to have help doing it. She thinks about telling Jonathan *forget it, I changed my mind*, but the thought of having to walk back her lie to Steve, to his entire family is far too daunting.

Better to just have a fake boyfriend.

Nancy sees the door to the restaurant opening and moves toward Jonathan, almost instinctively. He frowns at her sudden movement, but picks up on her intentions quickly, wrapping his arm around her once more, solid, steady.

Tommy’s head appears around the door.

“Hey Nance, heard you’re banging the photographer.”

“Hello, Tommy,” she says dryly.

If Tommy knows, everyone knows.

“Anyway, best man duties mean I’m here to tell you to get your asses inside. Speeches, and all.”

Nancy frowns. "I thought you were just a groomsman?"

"Whatever. Just . . . get in here so he can take the pictures."

"We're on our way," Jonathan says pleasantly, as Tommy rolls his eyes and disappears inside.

"Sorry about him," Nancy apologizes, "he's always been—"

"A dick?" Jonathan guesses.

Nancy shrugs, "I was going to say asshole, but, yeah."

Jonathan laughs, and then walks away, back to the shadows. Nancy feels a sharp stab of alarm, but he's only slinging a large bag she hadn't noticed before onto his shoulder.

Photographer. Cameras. Of course. He's not just here to prop up her ruse.

"Hey," she says, waiting for him to turn to her, giving him one last chance to back out. "You're really sure you want to do this? Because I can—"

"I'm sure." He looks at her sideways. "Six months?"

She lets out a grateful laugh, and instead of answering, says, "Thank you." Nancy tries to put everything she's feeling into the words, the gratitude, the relief, and as he looks back at her, she thinks he understands.

He raises his eyebrows. "Don't mention it. Literally. Or everyone will know."

"Right," she says, nodding solemnly. "Six months."

He nods back at her. "Exactly. Shall we go in, honey?"

Nancy makes a face at him.

"No pet names. Got it," Jonathan says with a grin, and offers her his hand.

Nancy takes it, and holds on for dear life.

2. there is freedom within, there is freedom without

Even though it's *Steve's* wedding, somehow, Nancy has become almost as much a topic of conversation, a subject of furtive whispers, quickly averted gazes. She knew just how fast news could spread in Hawkins, but clearly the gossips have been working overtime since Steve went inside.

She's incredibly grateful to have Jonathan at her side, his hand gripping hers, already making the evening more bearable than it had been previously.

Which is why it's so alarming when he lets go of her hand.

"Where are you going?!" Nancy whispers, her eyes fearful, taking his hand back with force. "*You cannot abandon me.*"

"I have to go *do my job*, sweetie," Jonathan says, eyebrows raised.

"I thought we agreed no pet names," Nancy warns under her breath, but releases him, even as she feels the loss of him. "Go do your job, I guess," she sighs, shaking her head as he laughs at her indignance. She wrinkles her nose at his laughter.

Just like a couple together for six months would.

Perfect.

He leans toward her, his gaze meaningful, and Nancy's breath catches, but of course, they're supposed to be *dating*. Couples part with a kiss.

She should have expected this, should have prepared herself. (She should have done a lot of things.)

It happens quickly, before she can overthink it, leaning forward to meet him, pressing her mouth to his. His lips are dry, warm, his eyes fixed on hers.

His expression becomes, briefly, alarmed.

Nancy steps back, uncertain.

“Oh,” he stutters, his voice low. “I was just going to wish you good luck.”

“Oh,” Nancy says, blushing.

“No, no—” Jonathan shakes his head, “that was good, that was . . . that was . . . yeah.” He swallows, his gaze over her shoulder. “And uh, if everyone here didn’t know before, they definitely do now.”

Nancy flicks her eyes to the side. Not everyone is eyeing them with interest, but it’s close.

“I would offer to let you back out again, but looks like it’s too late for that,” Nancy says under her breath, with a shrug of apology.

He gives her a half-smile. It’s different than every smile he’s given her thus far, and Nancy feels like she’s seeing something rare, something real. Like she’s actually seeing *him*, maybe for the first time. But all he says is, “I wouldn’t even if I could,” with a raised eyebrow, before walking away.

Nancy manages to avoid any and all conversations through the dinner itself, her gaze wandering between her plate and her glass, or on Jonathan, who circles the room as various members of the wedding party, the family give speech after speech.

“Whatever happened to best man and maid of honor only?” she murmurs to Jonathan as he passes her.

He hides a smile. (Nancy can tell. She feels absurdly pleased about it, for some reason. Like she made the right choice, or something along those lines.)

After the dinner she isn’t so lucky.

Nancy's at the bar, pondering if she should switch to water, when she hears her name from behind her once more.

"Nancy?"

She turns to find Robin, Steve standing just behind her, hands clasped together, both of them with equally nervous looks on their faces.

"Oh, hi," Nancy says, uncertain. She tries to smile, manages, for the most part.

"I know this is . . . well. Awkward. But I just wanted to introduce myself," Robin says, with a hopeful smile.

"It's so nice to meet you," Nancy tells her, meaning it. There's a sweetness about Robin, and Nancy can see what drew Steve to her, the unassuming smile, the bright eyes.

"We're so glad you could make it. And Steve just told me!"

Nancy frowns. "About?"

Robin's voice drops to a hushed whisper. "About you and *Jonathan*. Our photographer—oh, but of course you know that. I couldn't believe it!"

"Oh." Nancy blinks, her eyes flicking to Steve, who still looks nervous. "Right, of course. I guess that's news."

"It was just so surprising, especially after you didn't put him on your RSVP, but how funny! That you're both here together."

"Well, I mean, I didn't want to put him as my plus one because we knew he'd be working," Nancy stammers, inventing wildly, "and so you wouldn't have to pay for an extra plate, and you know, we didn't want to make it a *thing*, this is *your* wedding, after all."

"Oh, that's so sweet," Robin sighs, "all of it. That you two are *here*, *together*. It just makes an special day even more special."

Nancy looks at her, wary, but Robin seems sincere. She blinks as Robin sidles closer.

“So how long has it been? How did you two meet? Have you met Joyce?”

She has answers for two of the three. (At least she thinks she does, she has no idea who Joyce is. But Nancy’s fairly certain she hasn’t met her.) “Six months, I haven’t met Joyce, not yet and, um, it’s a . . . long story.”

Everything ends up being a long story, as Nancy makes her way through the evening.

“Where did he go to school?”

“Where does he live?”

“What does he do?”

Nancy truly believes she knows the answer to that one, but two seconds after she answers, she starts to second guess herself.

She finds him in the corner, reloading.

“Psst—hey,” Nancy whispers. “You *are* a photographer, right?”

Jonathan looks at her, frowning, gestures to the camera around his neck. Lifts it up, slowly, and very deliberately, takes a picture of her.

Nancy gives him a look. “I meant like, outside of weddings in Hawkins, Indiana. Is this what you do, you know, for a living?”

“Oh.” Jonathan nods. “Yeah. Why?”

She narrows her eyes. “Because people keep asking me *questions* about you, that’s *kind of* how this works. We need to figure this out. Like, come up with a full history.”

“Sure,” he shrugs.

Nancy looks at him, expectant.

He looks back. “Oh, did you mean *right now*?”

“I’m just saying, we need to . . . you know, get our stories straight.

The only things I know about you are that you're kind to strangers and that you smoke."

"Actually, I'm trying to quit," Jonathan begins, then stops when he sees the glare she gives him. "Okay, I see what you're saying, but—I'm sort of of *busy* right now, *darling*." He gives her a significant look, then flicks his eyes over her shoulder. A warning.

Nancy glances to the side, spots the eavesdroppers, who aren't even trying to hide the fact that they're listening. She moves closer, lowers her voice. "It's just, I'm not sure everything about our relationship can be a *long story*, which I think I've said at least fifteen times already."

"Okay," he says. "We can meet before the wedding, hash it out tomorrow? I've got to get there early anyway."

Tomorrow seems like *far* too long to go without a concrete backstory to Nancy, but she feels like she's already asked for too much from him, and so, she agrees.

Of course, the next time she sees him, he's hissing at her from behind a pillar, "Hey, is your last name Wheeler?"

She nods at him over her wine glass, a small smirk on her face. "Which aunt got to you?"

"Purple dress," Jonathan says, looking behind him, panicky. "Also, she wanted to know where we met? Did we decide that? I couldn't exactly say *outside, just now*."

Nancy gives him a sympathetic, yet knowing look, even as she refrains from an *I told you so*.

"I don't think we can wait until tomorrow. Can we talk," he looks around, "not here?"

"We just have to make it through the rest of tonight and then we'll be a perfect, *prepared* couple tomorrow," she tells him. "We can go to my hotel, grab a drink. Figure this out."

The hotel doesn't have her reservation.

"I called *last week* to confirm," Nancy berates the desk clerk, "and you said it was *fine*, you said you *had me in the book*." She realizes she's probably being unfair, considering it's most likely not *his* fault the hotel lost her reservation, but he's the one standing in front of her, and thus is the recipient of her ire.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I have no record of your reservation."

Nancy inhales deeply, rage coursing through her veins. "Did you just call me *ma'am*?"

"Okay," Jonathan says to the clerk, putting his arm around her, to keep her from jumping over the desk and committing a murder, Nancy suspects. "Do you have *any* rooms?"

"We're hosting the guests from the Harrington wedding, we are *completely* booked," the clerk sniffs, his tone dismissive.

"That's *me*!" Nancy cries. "I am a guest of the Harrington wedding! I refuse to believe that—"

"Thanks so much," Jonathan says to the clerk, cutting her off, steering her away from the desk, walking her toward the exit.

"What are you *doing*?"

"Saving that poor clerk from you, it's not his fault, y'know."

Nancy glares at him, sullen. "I know."

Jonathan raises an eyebrow.

"It's just this *stupid* town, of course it would try to fuck me over like this, now I'm going to have to sleep in my *rental car*, or beg Carol for a room, or—"

He looks at her, considering, then seems to make up his mind. "You aren't going to have to sleep in your car." He pivots toward the door, then turns his head back to her. "Well, are you coming?"

"Where are we going?" she asks, trotting next to him, dragging her suitcase behind her. "Wait, do *you* have a room here?"

"Just follow me, okay?" he says, nodding toward her car.

Nancy does. All the way out of the parking lot, down some roads she's never even been on, even when she was growing up. The house they arrive at is small, a little run down, but the windows glow with a warm light and Nancy has a sneaking suspicion as to where they've arrived.

"Is this *your* house?" she asks, struggling out of the car. "This is too much, I can't—"

"It's my mom's house," he tells her, "I've never lived here, it was my grandparents' before they died. And she won't mind, I promise."

Nancy bites her lip. "It's not *that*, you've already done enough for me, I can't just crash—"

"Think of it as . . . coming home to meet my mom? That's a six month thing, right?"

"Is her name Joyce?" Nancy asks, thinking back to Robin's question.

Jonathan tilts his head. "Yeah, did I tell you that? I don't think I did."

Nancy raises her eyebrows, shrugs. "I'm psychic, didn't you know? You should know that. It's been six months."

"Ha ha," he says, as he unlocks the door. "And don't worry, my brother's still at school, so you can just sleep in his room, it's fine." He pauses, calling out, "Mom? I'm home, someone's with me."

No one answers.

"I guess she's still out—oh, here, let me get that," he says as Nancy tries to wrestle her suitcase through the doorway.

"It's fine, I can manage," Nancy huffs out, and drops it on the floor with a weary sigh. "So, I know this isn't my hotel, but I could really use that drink."

He laughs, gesturing for her to take a seat at the kitchen table. "I'm pretty sure my mom stopped hiding the liquor in her closet once we both left home, I'll see what we have."

Five minutes later, they're holding glasses of vodka up in a toast, having failed to find mixers of any kind in the fridge.

"To our six month anniversary?" Jonathan ventures.

Nancy shakes her head, and says, seriously, "No. This is to you."

He narrows his eyes, wary. "Uh, why?"

"You've literally saved me. Twice. First, with Steve, and now, letting me stay here. For absolutely no reason."

Jonathan frowns, protesting, "You needed help—"

"And most people would have completely ignored me and left me to curl up in the backseat of my car."

"Yeah, well, I don't like most people."

"And yet," Nancy says, "you helped me anyway. Why?"

Jonathan goes silent, staring down into his glass. Nancy worries that she's overstepped. She'd forgotten that he is, still, for the most part, a stranger. Eventually he looks up. "I think I'll need a few more of these before we get to that. That's like . . . ten month stuff. A year, maybe."

"Got it," Nancy says, in a rush. Before it can get too awkward, she continues, "So you have a brother?"

He relaxes, clearly relieved to be on another topic. "Yeah, Will. He's 19."

"Oh, weird, me too."

"You're 19? I guess I should take that vodka back."

Nancy throws him a look, pulling her glass back protectively. "No, I also have a brother who's 19. Mike."

"And what does Mike do?"

"He's at school. MIT," Nancy says, and adds under her breath, "At least one of us made it to Cambridge."

Jonathan frowns, but doesn't press it. "Will, uh, he's at RISD. He's coming home Sunday, so I'm sticking around an extra day to see him before I head home."

"And home, where is that?"

"New York." He pauses, and then clarifies, "City."

"Oh." Nancy swallows. "Me too."

Jonathan coughs, mid-swig, and places his glass down hard on the table. "Seriously? That's lucky."

"Yeah," Nancy agrees. Steve's comment makes much more sense now. She feels strange, her skin prickling, like fate's hand placed the perfect person in her path, just when she needed him. "Where do you live—no, wait, wait, let me guess." She grins, suddenly giddy. "Oh, you *definitely* live in the Village."

Jonathan makes a face, refilling his glass, reaching over to do the same to hers. "Joke's on you, I'm on the Lower East, although I *would* if I could afford it. Where are you?"

"Morningside Heights."

"So you're at Columbia," he deduces.

Nancy tilts her head in acknowledgement. "J-school."

"Oh, that's great, did you go there for college, too, or . . ." he trails off, after seeing the look on her face.

“No, I went to Penn,” Nancy says, her voice clipped.

Jonathan looks like he can tell this is a delicate subject, so when he asks, he asks quickly. “Is that . . . State or the University of?”

“U.”

He raises his eyebrows, but refrains from saying anything else, as Nancy presses her lips together in a grateful smile.

“And you?”

They go on, round and round, discussing favorite foods, restaurants, bars, movies, bands, until Nancy feels like she has a grip on Jonathan Byers, who he is.

She thinks she likes him.

“So . . . the most important question,” she says finally, smiling warmly at him, although if it’s due to her newly realized affection or the vodka, she can’t quite tell. “How did we meet?”

Jonathan blinks, a departure from his his rapid fire responses to her previous questions. “Shit.”

They sit, pondering, as the silence stretches on.

Nancy opens her mouth, about to suggest something innocuous, like a bar or restaurant, when she hears a key in the lock, and the door opening. She’d forgotten they were in someone’s home, that it wasn’t just her and Jonathan, removed from the world. She’d thought it was just them.

Two people enter, an older woman and a younger boy, clearly related, both to each other and Jonathan, Nancy reading their family history in their faces.

Jonathan stands immediately, knocking his chair over, his face confused, delighted. “Will?”

“Hi,” Will beams.

“Jonathan,” his mother says, looking at Nancy with curious apprehension, “who’s this?”

Nancy bites her lip, coming to stand next to Jonathan, uncertain.

“Hi,” she says, hesitant.

"Mom," he says, and places his hand around her waist, comfortable, like he's *actually* been doing it for six months, pulling her closer. "This is my girlfriend. Nancy."

3. and i'm counting the steps to the door of your heart

“Whoa,” Will says, dumbfounded. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Will,” Joyce admonishes him automatically, even as she stares, wide-eyed, at Nancy.

“Sorry.” Will rolls his eyes at his mother, then turns back to Jonathan. “Are you serious?”

Nancy can't help but think the same thing. He can't be serious about this. Lying to everyone at Steve's wedding is *one* thing, but his family too?

“Uh, yeah,” Jonathan coughs, and Nancy fights the urge to elbow him. If they're doing this, he needs to sound more confident. “Nancy, this is my mom, my brother.”

Joyce doesn't skip a beat. (Nancy can see where Jonathan gets it.) She steps forward, pulling Nancy out of Jonathan's embrace and into a loose hug, saying into her ear, “Oh, sweetie, it's so nice to meet you.”

“Oh,” Nancy breathes, almost a gasp. “It's . . . wonderful to meet you too.”

“I would have gotten the house into better order if I'd known you were coming,” Joyce frets, releasing her, and flicks her eyes at Jonathan in a way that reminds Nancy of her own mother, a look that means imminent yelling. “Can I talk to you for a second?” She walks away without giving him a chance to say yes.

Jonathan follows her, looking chastened, throwing a significant glance at Nancy over his shoulder as she gives him a pointed look, one that says *we should not be splitting up right now*.

Nancy hears a door close, and then it's just her and Will standing awkwardly under the bright glow of the kitchen light, the silence threatening to overwhelm them.

“So—” Nancy starts, as Will says, “I'm Will, by the way.”

“Oh,” she says, blinking. “I know. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Cool,” he nods. “No offense, but uh, I haven’t heard *anything* about you.”

She tries to stop herself from cringing, but doesn’t quite manage. She opens her mouth, trying to come up with an excuse on the fly, when she hears Joyce screech from the other room, “Six *months*?!”

Nancy closes her mouth.

She sits back down, sinking into her chair. Stares at her hands as they rest on the table, avoiding Will’s gaze, holding her face in what she hopes is a neutral position. There’s nothing she can do now without digging further into the hole they’ve put themselves in. Better to wait and see how Jonathan plays it.

She doesn’t have to wait long.

Joyce strides into the room, followed by a subdued Jonathan, making a beeline for Nancy. She tries to stand up, getting caught in the chair as Joyce throws her arms around her again.

“You’ve got such a good heart,” Joyce gushes, and that is *not* what Nancy was expecting, *at all*. She meets Jonathan’s eyes, her own wide with panic, trying to read the expression on his face.

“Oh, I . . . ” Nancy trails off, waiting for Jonathan to pick up the sentence.

He shakes his head, shrugging.

Nancy glares at him.

“But you shouldn’t have been thinking about *me*,” Joyce continues, “I’m *fine*, all I want is for you two to be *happy*.”

What? Nancy mouths at Jonathan over his mother’s shoulder.

He finally comes to her rescue. “I was telling Mom about how you didn’t want to make things awkward for her, since you know, she works with Robin at the store, and since sometimes Steve comes in,

that's why we wanted to wait to tell her until after the wedding."

"Oh. Right. Of course."

"And then when the hotel lost your reservation, we figured a day early couldn't hurt."

"Yes," Nancy says, trying to sound like this is all old news to her.

Joyce holds her at arm's length, regarding her fondly, and Nancy feels a slight twinge of regret at their deception. "But now we know, and we're so happy to have you here."

"Wait, what?" Will asks, beyond confused. "You didn't tell us you had a girlfriend because of Mom?"

Jonathan sighs, exasperated, and pulls his brother to the side as Joyce asks Nancy the requisite questions, ones Nancy can actually answer with confidence for the first time all evening. She's never been so glad to be able to say where she grew up without questioning it.

Eventually, after Joyce's questions peter out, she feels an arm wrap around her, Nancy glancing up to find Jonathan looking down at her with a faint smile. She places her own arm around him, and it feels so *comfortable*, so natural, so *real*, for a fleeting moment Nancy forgets what it is that they're doing, so that when he leans down to press a brief kiss to her lips, she doesn't register anything out of the ordinary has happened until after he's pulled away, his eyes registering the same faint surprise she's sure is also on her face.

She blinks, quickly, bashful, feeling herself go pink, her gaze flickering away.

"Aww, they're blushing."

Will's regarding them with crossed arms, a smug smile on his face that Nancy recognizes from a lifetime of being an older sibling. Jonathan reaches out with his free arm and shoves him.

"Boys."

“Sorry, Mom,” Jonathan mutters.

“Well, on that note—he never apologizes, it must be you being here, so thanks, Nancy—I’m going to go to bed. It’s been a long day at the airport, my flight got delayed twice, so I’m beat. Let me just grab my stuff—oh, Nancy, is this your suitcase? Did you want me to take it to Jonathan’s room for you?” Will says, his grin, somehow, growing broader. A shit-eating grin.

He knows.

He knows and he knows exactly where Nancy had been planning to sleep tonight.

“Um,” Nancy says hesitantly, as Jonathan glances at his mother, who looks uncertain.

“I can sleep on the couch,” he offers, quickly.

Joyce hesitates for a moment, then shakes her head, making up her mind. “No, of course you’re not sleeping on the couch, it’s . . . fine. You’re adults, I know how this works, you’re not my boys anymore.”

“Mom,” Will says, fondly, coming up to hug her from behind. “We’ll always be your boys.”

Joyce wrinkles her nose at him.

“He’s right,” Jonathan agrees as he slips out of Nancy’s embrace, wrapping himself around both his mother and brother, even as Will groans, “Ugh, get off, get off,” and smiles sheepishly at Nancy.

She feels like an interloper, intruding in a moment she has no right to witness. She knows she should leave, let the family catch up, but something keeps her standing there, her heart full.

“Right,” Joyce says, extricating herself from the arms surrounding her. “Will, can you take Nancy’s suitcase? Nancy, I’m going to guess my son didn’t give you a tour.”

Nancy dutifully troops behind Joyce as she shows her the rest of the house, smaller than the one Nancy had grown up in, but there’s a

warmth that Nancy can feel, a sense of family emanating that makes it feel like a home.

“I thought you said you didn’t grow up here,” Nancy says, an aside to Jonathan as Joyce shows her his room. She’s only known him a matter of hours, but as she walks through the doorway she’s struck by how much the room feels like it belongs to him.

“I didn’t.” He rubs the back of his neck in embarrassment. “But Mom wanted—“

“I wanted him to always have a place to come home to,” Joyce says simply, and Nancy’s regret at lying to this woman grows ever deeper.

“Your mother is going to hate me,” she tells Jonathan as they return to the kitchen, Joyce having wished them a good night with a quick whisper in Jonathan’s ear before retiring to her room.

He frowns at her. “Why? She actually seemed to really like you.”

Nancy gives him a look. “When we *break up* tomorrow. You’re going to have to be the one to dump me, there’s no way I’m doing that to her.”

“Oh. Right.” He twists his mouth at her. “She might kill me if I let you go, though.”

Nancy shrugs. “I am a catch.”

He shakes his head, rolling his eyes. “I’m gonna go say goodnight to Will—I told him, by the way. My mom, she’s a *terrible* liar, I couldn’t expect her to go to work every day with that hanging over her, but Will, he should be okay.”

“Is that how you got the job? The wedding, I mean. Because your mom works with Robin?”

Jonathan shrugs again. “I was home visiting, I stopped by the store, Robin was moaning that they didn’t like any of the local photographers . . . it worked out.”

Nancy smiles. “Yeah. For me, especially. Have I said thank you

recently? Because, thank you.”

He dismisses her thanks with a laugh, waving it away. “You don’t have to worry about Will though, he won’t give us away. But he knew immediately something was up.”

“Little brothers, they always know,” she sighs. “Mike could always tell when Steve had snuck into my room the night before, always made *comments* at breakfast.”

His eyebrows raise, then lower. “Oh, and sorry, you know, about before. The uh, kiss, it’s just you know, it felt like in the moment . . .”

“No, no,” Nancy says, blushing again. “It definitely, uh. Yeah, it felt . . . right.”

“Right,” Jonathan says, looking down. “Anyway, I’ll see you in a bit, just gotta . . .” He gestures vaguely toward the hall, before turning and disappearing down it.

Nancy looks around the kitchen, picking up their abandoned glasses and rinsing them in the sink, turning out the light.

She makes it two steps down the hall before turning back and grabbing the vodka.

Nancy’s in the middle of pulling a pillow off the bed when she hears a quiet knock on the door.

“Nance?”

She pulls the door open, confused. “You know this is your house, right? Your room. Why are you knocking?” she whispers as Jonathan slips past her, closing the door firmly behind him.

“I just . . . ” He shrugs, awkward. “I didn’t want to intrude, if you were, you know . . . ” He looks down, to the makeshift bed Nancy has made on the floor, a nest of blankets and the pillow she’d stolen from him. “What’s this?”

“I stole your pillow, I hope you don’t mind.”

He frowns at her. “You don’t—”

Nancy stops him with an outstretched hand, as she folds her legs under her, sinking into her nest. “Don’t even start, *pumpkin*, only one of us has to do an actual *job* tomorrow, I just have to drink wine and smile from time to time, you definitely need to sleep in an actual bed.”

“I was going to say you don’t have to sleep on the floor,” he says as he slides down the wall, coming to rest across from her, his legs outstretched.

Nancy raises her eyebrows, but doesn’t ask him to elaborate. Instead, she fishes the bottle of vodka out of where it’s hiding under a fold of a blanket, and offers it to him. He laughs, and unscrews the cap, pausing before he can take a drink.

“It’s okay, right, that I called you that?”

“Called me what?”

He tilts his head toward her, takes a quick swig from the bottle. “Nance. I know Steve, earlier, he—”

“Oh,” she shrugs. “Yeah, everyone calls me that. It’s not like it was just him. What about you?” she asks, as he hands the bottle back to her. “Do you have any nicknames I should be aware of? Jon? Jonny? J.B.?”

“Jonathan,” he says firmly, and there’s a finality to his tone that leads Nancy to believe there’s a story there. She nods in acknowledgement,

reminding herself to ask him about it later, when she realizes—there won't be a later. After tomorrow, she'll probably never see him again. The thought makes her wistful, somehow, like she's already missing him even as he's sitting right in front of her.

To keep herself from saying any of these thoughts aloud, she places all her attention on the bottle, taking a sip and almost missing his question. She swallows, a little too quickly, and coughs.

"Say that again?"

"I was asking, if you didn't have a hotel room, how did you get ready for the rehearsal dinner? I'm guessing you didn't fly in that dress."

"In the car." She shakes her head. "Like I was ten years old again, changing after ballet."

"Oh."

"What?" Nancy says, suspicious.

"It's just," his eyes flick toward the floor, a slight flush appearing on his face, "you look really nice."

"Oh." She blinks in surprise, looking down at her dress, which is somewhat the worse for wear after an entire evening and her current position on the floor. "Thanks." Her mouth twists into a grateful smile.

Jonathan lifts his gaze back to hers, returning her smile, leaning his head back against the wall. He holds his hand out for the bottle. "So . . . the most important question. How did we meet?"

Nancy laughs as she passes the vodka to him. "I think we should say what we think at the same time." She waits for him to drink, then counts it down.

"Three, two, one—bowling alley." "Flower shop."

She blinks at him, making a face. "Flower shop? Who meets in a flower shop?"

“Flower shops are *romantic*, who meets at a bowling alley? They’re disgusting, you have to take your shoes off.”

“The *only* reason *you* would be at a flower shop would be to buy flowers, presumably for *another woman*. It certainly doesn’t start our relationship off in a good place,” she tells him, laughing.

Jonathan shakes his head at her, stopping her with an outstretched hand. “What if I was getting flowers for a shoot? What if I wanted to brighten up my apartment—okay, fine, you’ve got me there,” he says, off her look of disbelief. “But bowling alley? No way.”

“It’s *cute*, you could have shown me how to throw the ball.”

“I don’t believe for a second you don’t already know how to bowl—and even if you didn’t, you wouldn’t be asking some stranger for help.”

“You’re literally helping me *right now*!”

“Yes, but,” he points out, “you didn’t ask, I offered. It’s only been,” he checks his watch, “five hours, but after tonight I think it’s pretty clear that you’re the kind of person who would rather die than rely on someone else.”

Nancy stiffens, stung.

“That’s not true, you don’t know me at all if you think that’s true,” she spits out, defensive.

He turns his head, looks at her sideways. “That’s not . . . I didn’t mean it in a bad way, I think it’s . . . ” There’s a long pause. “Can I ask?”

“Ask me what,” she says, guarded.

He shakes his head. “You just seem . . . it seems like you hate it here. Why did you come back?”

Nancy bites her lip.

“Or,” he says, watching her face, “I guess the better question is . . .

why did you leave? You don't have to—I don't . . . ” he trails off. “I guess I'm just curious why you came to a wedding you clearly don't want to attend.”

Nancy swallows, then holds her hand out for the bottle. He hands it to her wordlessly, watching as she takes a large gulp.

“I got into Harvard,” she says, feeling the knot in her stomach loosen as she says the words. “And my best friend died.”

He makes a noise of sympathy, and she dismisses it, almost second nature at this point. “Not—not on the same day or anything. But,” she shrugs. “Steve had a party, and Barb wasn't drinking, it wasn't really her thing. She wanted to leave, I wanted to stay . . . and I didn't even find out until the next morning some drunk asshole ran a red light. And that was it. She was gone.”

Jonathan watches her, his expression careful.

“And Steve, he was great. He was there, every day. He ended up staying in Hawkins, he didn't go to school, he took a job with his dad. And then . . . I got into Harvard.” She can hear the emotion in her voice, stronger than usual due to the vodka. She thinks about putting the bottle away, takes another swig instead.

He frowns. “You said . . . you went to—”

“Penn,” Nancy finishes his sentence. “Yeah. It's . . . only a ten hour drive from Hawkins. Cambridge was just too far. And Steve could come for weekends . . . so. I didn't go to Harvard.”

“But you wanted to.”

Nancy breathes out a laugh. “Who wouldn't? It's *Harvard*. It's why I worked so hard. But,” she shrugs. “Steve had given up everything for me. Penn's still an Ivy. It was worth it, I thought. And then I got into Columbia. And I was so happy, it was graduation weekend, I was going to tell him over dinner. And before I could say anything . . . he pulled out a ring, told me about all his plans for us, how we'd have kids right away, he'd take over his dad's business . . . and I'd told him, so many times, that wasn't what I wanted, I wanted *more*. But,

he told me that I didn't need more, that he'd take care of me, that all I needed was him."

Jonathan raises an eyebrow.

Nancy raises one back. "Yeah. So, lots of tears, lots of screaming. And I came home for one last summer, my parents were getting ready to move anyway, with only Holly at home it didn't make sense for them to have such a big house—and it was like the entire town had turned on me. Because of *what I did*. To Steve. So I left. I moved to the city early, and I never looked back."

"Until now."

She shakes her head, rueful. "I thought . . . I don't know what I was thinking. That I'd *show them*, that I was better than what they turned me into. That I was more than Steve, that I was more than who my boyfriend was. But then of course the *second* I had the chance to do that," she gestures toward him, "I make up a fake boyfriend."

He twists his mouth. "Should I take offense at *fake*?"

Nancy tilts her head, thinking. "A *temporary* boyfriend."

Jonathan shrugs. "Better, I guess."

She sighs. "It's ridiculous, I know. It *is*," she says, off his look of protest. "It's just . . ." she looks down, gathering strength. "Barb, she always had these *plans* for us. We'd go to school, be roommates in the city, we'd live out all our dreams, we wouldn't be like our parents. And if I went back to Hawkins, I felt like . . . I was letting her down." She can feel the tears now, choking her voice, the alcohol bringing her emotions to the surface. "And I know that's not . . . I'm not doing all of this because of her. I'm doing it for me. It's just harder than I thought it would be. Coming back."

She looks up. Jonathan's gaze is sympathetic, steady.

"Does that make any sense?"

He nods.

“So,” she says, wiping her eyes, before the tears get a chance to fall. “That’s it. That’s all you need to know about me.” She grins, a little sarcastic. “What do you think?”

Jonathan looks at her, considering, before extending his hand.

Nancy puts the bottle of vodka in it.

He laughs, and puts the bottle to the side. Extends his hand again.

“It’s nice to meet you, Nancy Wheeler.”

She smiles. Shakes his hand. Nods at the vodka. “Your turn.”

He glances at the bottle, back at her, his expression thoughtful.

“Do you want to know how I knew you needed help?”

“No,” she protests, realizing, “I just meant—the vodka, you don’t have to—”

“It was the look on your face,” Jonathan continues. He takes a quick sip, as if to satisfy her demand, and then goes on. “Did you know I was supposed to grow up here?”

Nancy shakes her head.

“I thought maybe Mom might have said something. It was Will. He uh, he had some health stuff, when he was younger—he’s fine, now—but. It was his lungs. And we had to stay close to the city, to be close to the doctors, and that meant staying in our old house. With my dad. And he’s, uh . . . ”

Just from his tone, Nancy can tell what kind of person his father is. “An asshole?”

He presses his lips together in a sardonic smile. “That’s . . . yeah.” He shakes his head, a quick jerk. “So, we stayed. And Will got better. But there were moments . . . I don’t know. We really thought we might lose him. And I’d be sitting there, in the hospital, *waiting*, for someone to come and tell us that everything was okay, that Will was fine. Or that he wasn’t.”

His voice is rough with emotion, and Nancy's heart breaks for him.

"But what I really wanted was for someone to come and tell us that it was a mistake, that they'd misdiagnosed him, that he was fine." He takes a deep breath. "Or on the really bad days, that it would just be . . . over. Because it would fix everything, immediately. He didn't have to get better—he would just be . . . not sick anymore. I knew it wasn't possible, but. I still wished for it anyway. But no one ever came."

Nancy blinks.

"So when I saw you there, with that look on your face . . . the same look I'd had on mine, so many times. You were desperate. And I could do the thing no one could ever do for me. Even if it was just for a moment. So." He shrugs. "That's why."

His eyes meet hers, and Nancy finds herself pushing herself onto her knees, across the floor, so that she's sitting next to him, back against the wall, placing her hand into his. Squeezing tight as she tilts her head up toward him.

"Sorry," he says, looking down at her. "I know I said that was year stuff. It's uh, a little heavy for six months. Although I think yours was heavier."

He smiles apologetically at her, the half-smile, and as Nancy looks up, she realizes she wants to kiss him. Not because there are people watching, not to prove anything to anyone, but because she knows him now, who he is. Because she wants to.

So she does.

It takes a moment, she thinks she's taken him by surprise, but then he's kissing her back slowly, his free hand coming up to rest in her hair. It's a little like coming home, not to Hawkins, which certainly isn't her home anymore, but the feeling, like all of her cares and worries have been lifted from her, and she feels safe, warm, her hand in his, and his lips on hers.

When she pulls back, her head is spinning.

His gaze is fixed on her, steady, even as hers flicks down, then back

up. When she does focus on him, his brow is creased with concern.

“Nancy?”

She tries to answer, even as she realizes the spinning isn’t from the kiss, it’s from the vodka, which seems to have hit her all at once. The next thing she knows, she’s being pulled to her feet, swaying, as Jonathan holds her in his arms for the umpteenth time that night.

Nancy tries to protest, but she’s tired, so tired, and he’s leading her over to the bed, swinging her legs up, pulling the blanket over her.

He turns away, heading for her nest on the floor. Nancy knows what he’s planning to do, and she has no intention of letting him do it. She reaches up, grabbing hold of his arm.

He goes still.

“Jonathan,” she mumbles, forcing her eyes open with great effort. She looks up at him, and there’s an expression on his face she’s unable to read. She lets go of his arm.

“Stay,” she says, or she thinks she does, but she can’t be sure.

And then everything goes dark.

4. when the world comes in

Nancy wakes with a start.

She regrets it immediately.

The hangover isn't the worst one she's had in her life, but it's close. She opens her eyes for a brief moment, the light streaming through the curtains causing her let out a quiet moan and scrunch them shut once more.

She begins to roll over, trying to escape the brightness, when she realizes there's something stopping her, some kind of weight holding her in place. She risks the sunlight, opening one lid a crack.

It's an arm.

Memories of the previous night rush through Nancy's mind—the rehearsal dinner, the vodka, the kiss.

Jonathan.

She cranes her neck slightly so that she can see him, his arm still slung over her waist. His hair is covering his eyes and Nancy sneaks a hand up so she can brush it away.

Like most people, he looks younger when he sleeps.

Nancy feels a rush of tenderness as she watches him, even as she knows she has no right to feel that way. In the light of the morning her alcohol-laced emotions feel foolish, her actions even more so. *It was just the vodka*, she tells herself. *You'll go to the wedding, you'll go back home, you'll never see him again.*

But even as she's telling herself that, Jonathan shifts in his sleep, the arm around her tightening, pulling her closer to him, and Nancy knows she's lying to herself, that it wasn't just the vodka, and that she doesn't know what she'll do if she never sees him again.

She also knows there's nothing she can do for the moment, for her hangover and situation both, so she buries her head in his chest and

waits for the pounding in her head to cease.

An unfortunate side effect of her burrowing, however, is that it wakes Jonathan up.

He makes a confused sort of noise, one that Nancy can feel, thrumming through him, through her. She can tell the moment he realizes where he is, who she is, because there's a sharp inhale that he cuts off as she shifts slightly back, enough that her eyes can lift to his. He blinks.

"Hey," he says, his voice gravelly with sleep.

"Hey." She smiles weakly at him. "You stayed."

"Well, you made a good point, one of us does have a job to do today." He stretches, removing his arm from around her, Nancy feeling the loss of its warm weight even as he brings his hands up in between them, resting close to hers.

"Yeah," she says, twisting her mouth, "although drinking wine seems like it might not be in the cards for me."

Jonathan winces. "Let me get you some water."

He starts to push himself up, but Nancy grabs onto his hand, stopping him.

"It's okay, don't worry about me, I just need to sleep for like," she yawns, "another five minutes and I'll be fine."

Jonathan doesn't answer her, but instead takes her hand in his, turning it over, his thumb tracing the scar that bisects her palm, which she realizes he must have noticed due to the firmness of her grip. "What happened?"

"Oh that?" She sits up, shaking her head. "Cut it on a broken bottle." Nancy waits for him to release her hand, but he's still frowning down at it, and she feels the need to reassure him. "It doesn't hurt."

Jonathan shakes his head. "No, it's not that, it's just . . ." He presses his lips together, seems to come to a decision, and lays his hand on

top of hers, palm up.

His scar is neater than hers, smaller. Like it was done on purpose, not like hers, the physical reminder of the worst moment of her life, the bottle she was about to deposit into the trash shattering in her hand as she clenched it into a fist, as Steve had said, “It’s Barb,” and Nancy hadn’t even felt the glass as it sliced its way into her palm.

She can feel a confused smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, even as she fights it—this shouldn’t be something to be giddy about—but the sight of his hand, a twin to hers, feels like it means something, like it’s some kind of a sign, even more than the happy coincidences of the previous evening.

Nancy pulls her hand out from underneath his, mirroring his actions, running her thumb down the thin white line. She glances up. He’s looking at her with trepidation, like he’s not sure what her reaction will be. She shakes her head.

“That’s so weird,” she says with a small laugh.

“Yeah,” he says, slowly. He looks at her out of the corner of his eye. “Nancy—”

“I’m so sorry,” she blurts out, cutting him off. She doesn’t know what he’s about to say, but she has a strange urge to get her apology out before he speaks, just in case. “About last night.”

He looks at her strangely. “You already apologized. At least a million times.”

“No, I mean . . .” She shakes her head again, looking down, avoiding his eyes. “I was . . . a mess. A vodka-soaked mess. And—”

“Don’t worry,” he says, twisting his mouth, looking uncomfortable. “I—it’s . . . fine. We’ll break up on schedule, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Nancy frowns, her eyebrows knitting together. That’s not what she means *at all*. “No, that’s not—”

She’s interrupted by a sharp rap on the door, which startles her

enough that she inhales sharply, her head jerking toward the noise. She can hear Joyce, her voice muffled, but can't make out any words, other than *breakfast*.

"I better see what she wants," Jonathan says, his voice tinged with regret, looking at her carefully out of the corner of his eye.

Nancy releases the breath she'd inhaled. She wants to keep going, wants to tell him that she wants the opposite, that she doesn't want to break up on schedule. She doesn't want to break up *at all*.

But all she says is, "Right, yeah. Of course." Waiting for him to get up, and squinting at him when he doesn't.

He looks down, nodding to where her hand is gripping his, holding him in place. She twists her mouth ruefully, letting go, releasing him. He slips out from under the blanket, making his way to the door.

"I'll be right back," he says, his eyes flicking to hers, then away, and then he's gone.

Nancy scoots back down, rolling over so she can watch for his return. She's going to tell him. As soon as he gets back.

She closes her eyes.

When she wakes up again, she's alone.

Her headache is nowhere near gone, but it's bearable. As Nancy pushes herself up, wincing at the sight of her crumpled dress, she

notices a glass of water and two aspirin lying on the bedside table, which she swallows down with a sigh of gratitude.

The aspirin, the water, her morning ablutions, and a change of clothes give Nancy the nerve to emerge into the house proper, where she finds Joyce sitting at the kitchen table with a broad-shouldered someone Nancy doesn't recognize from behind—at least, until he turns around at the sound of her footsteps.

"Nancy Wheeler," he says, as a greeting.

Nancy gapes, her mouth open, before stuttering out, "Hi, Chief." She's pretty sure the last time she saw him he was shooing her and Steve away from the quarry, Lovers' Lake being far too popular the evening in question.

"Oh, you know Nancy?" Joyce says as she stands, pulling a chair out and gesturing for Nancy to sit, a plate of eggs and toast on the table. "I thought you might, since she grew up here, but I wasn't sure if she was the troublemaking type."

"What, like us?" Hopper asks with a smirk. "Nah, just normal teenage stuff, nothing like you, or me. Or her mother," he adds, as an afterthought.

Joyce frowns in confusion, setting a glass of orange juice in front of Nancy.

"Karen Roberts," he says, with a significant look.

Joyce gasps so loud Nancy actually looks around for the source of her shock, only to find that Joyce is staring at her, delight on her face.

"You're *Karen's* daughter?" she asks, taking a step closer, the better to peer at Nancy's face, trying to see her heritage written there.

"Yes?" Nancy says, as if she isn't quite sure who her mother is.

Joyce smiles at her, even fonder than the ones Nancy had received last night. "Your mother and I . . ." she trails off, eyes losing their focus as she recalls the memories of yesteryear. "We certainly got up to some trouble, back in our day."

Hopper coughs. "I'll say."

Joyce raises an eyebrow, which he returns with a wink, and Nancy realizes in an instant exactly what the Chief is doing at this particular kitchen table. There's a unbearable silence, which Nancy breaks a moment later, her voice shrill. "Where's Jonathan?"

Joyce frowns, her focus back on Nancy. "He left already, he's meeting Robin and the girls. It's a whole day thing, you didn't know?"

"Oh," Nancy says, the shock of disappointment hitting her, before she realizes an actual girlfriend *would* have known, and scrambles to cover. "I mean, yes, I knew, I just . . . forgot," she finishes, lamely.

"He said to let you sleep, but that he'll see you there? He wasn't sure what your plans were for today, before the wedding."

Nancy blinks. "Oh, I have some errands to run and then just getting ready," she invents on the spot, her original plans of laying around and watching television in her hotel room all day stymied by the desk clerk. What she *really* wants to do is talk to Jonathan, but that seems even less possible.

"Okay, well then," Joyce says, pushing her chair back, getting to her feet. "I'll be out most of the day with Hop, but Will should be here in case you forget these," she says, pulling a set of keys out of a drawer and placing them next to Nancy's plate.

Nancy stares at the keys, taken aback. "Oh, you don't have to, I can just—"

Joyce waves a hand at her, dismissing her protest. "It might have taken him a while, but my son brought you home, you're family now."

Nancy feels the guilt of lying to this woman threatening to overcome her once more.

She has to get out of here.

"Well, I better uh, run those errands. See if I can get someone to do my hair last minute," she says in a rush, snatching up the keys,

depositing them into her purse, walking quickly to the door.

“Say hi to your folks,” Hopper calls after her, as Joyce waves.

Nancy blinks, and nods.

And flees.

She finds herself driving aimlessly down the streets of Hawkins, swinging through her old neighborhood, parking in the cul de sac. Her old house looks the same on the outside, the only visible difference being the cars parked in the driveway, and the mailbox. She wonders if her parents took it with them, if it proudly proclaims The Wheelers live in their new home.

The high school remains the high school, as does the quarry. Lovers' Lake, Benny's, all of her old haunts, all just the same as she'd left them.

Nancy knows she's just delaying the inevitable.

She knows where she's going to end up.

“Hi, Barb,” she says, bending down to lean her drugstore bouquet of flowers against the gravestone. Nancy knows it's ridiculous, Barb can't hear her, but she's always done it, ever since she was sixteen. Talking out her hopes, her dreams.

“Sorry I haven't been here in a while, but the city, it's great. You'd *love* it. I drove by your house earlier, your parents are still there, it

looks like, but no one was home when I rang the bell. Did you know they got a dog? It wouldn't stop barking at me through the door."

She breathes in, then out, preparing.

"Did you hear? Steve's getting married. And *not to me*, if you can believe it," she says, letting out a small laugh. "I know you weren't his biggest fan, but he was a good guy. Even if he isn't *my* good guy anymore. He was there, when I needed him. And . . . I wasn't, when he needed me. Guess that makes me a pretty shitty girlfriend. I'm not sure what Jonathan sees in me—oh, did I tell you? I tricked some guy into being my fake boyfriend because I couldn't face Steve without one. And here's the crazy thing . . . "

Nancy pauses, then barrels on, because if you can't admit your feelings about your fake boyfriend to your dead friend, then who can you admit them to?

"I really like him. I like him *so much*. I *shouldn't*, he's nowhere *near* my type, he's got the most *ridiculous* taste in music, but he's kind, and warm, and he's got the same scar as me, you know the one, and it's on the same *hand* even, how does that even happen? And I've known him for less than a day now and I don't think I ever want to . . . stop. Knowing him, that is. And then tomorrow, we're supposed to just *break up*, because the wedding will be over and there's no reason for us to keep up this charade. But . . . "

Nancy shrugs, and shakes her head.

"I don't want to."

Saying it out loud makes it more real, somehow, even if she's not saying it to the person who needs to hear it.

"And I don't even know how to tell him that. And I don't even know if he feels the same way. I mean, I . . . " Nancy trails off. *I kissed him, and he kissed me back*, she wants to say, but she holds back, the moment too fragile to put into words. She pauses, losing herself in the memory, then blinks, shaking her head, clearing it. She needs to focus.

“So what do you think, Barb? What should I do?”

As always, there’s no answer, but Nancy feels better, more sure, all the same.

Will’s sitting at the kitchen table when Nancy lets herself and her fresh updo back into the house, his head snapping up at the sound of the door.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” she replies, smiling at him awkwardly, edging toward Jonathan’s room. “Sorry, I just need to change and then I can get out of your way.”

Will shrugs, and goes back to sorting through a large pile of paper. “Okay,” he says dismissively.

Nancy’s about to make her escape, when something catches her eye. “Is this your portfolio?” she asks, taking a step closer.

He blinks, distracted. “Yeah.” He looks up. “It’s all right, I know you’re not really dating my brother, you don’t have to pretend to be interested.”

Nancy flinches, but even with him away at college she’s had enough phone calls with Mike to know how to play this. “And what if I actually am? Interested, that is,” she says, plopping herself into the chair next to his.

“Oh.” Will sounds taken aback, eyeing her suspiciously. “Really?”

She nods, eyebrows raised.

“Oh,” he repeats, but there’s a note of pleasure in his voice that hadn’t been there before. “Well, I can show you, then, if you really want to see it.”

“I really do,” she tells him, honestly.

Nancy wouldn’t call herself anything resembling an artist, or even a fan—she’d made the obligatory Met pilgrimage her second week in the city and wandered around for hours trying to find something interesting before giving up—but there’s something about Will’s work that draws her in. She can’t explain it.

“Are these . . . vines?” she asks, tilting her head sideways to see better. “And . . . carnivorous flowers?”

“It’s weird, I know,” he deflects, but Nancy stops him, pulling the papers closer to her, flipping through what looks like a series.

“These are incredible, Will,” she says, meaning it, glancing up at him.

He gives her a grateful smile. “I’m not sure how much longer you’re going to be pretending to date my brother, but you can come back and tell me that anytime.”

“Probably just until tomorrow,” Nancy says, regretfully.

Will makes a face. “That sucks. My mom, she really likes you.”

“That’s good to know. And what about you?” Nancy teases.

“You’re okay, I guess,” he shrugs, but he’s grinning.

“Thanks, I think,” she says with a laugh. “Glad to have your stamp of approval. I really lucked out when I uh, ran into your brother.” It starts out flippant, but by the time she reaches the end of the sentence, Nancy finds she’s completely sincere.

She looks up from the paper to find Will looking at her, cautiously, carefully.

“Jonathan, he uh, likes you too. And he doesn’t like most people.”

Nancy nods, slowly, her heart starting to pound. “He told me that.”

“Which part?”

“The second part.”

Will twists his mouth into a smile, giving her a small shrug. “Maybe you should ask him about the first part,” he says.

An hour later, Nancy’s staring at the church through her windshield, trying to find the strength to go in. Will had pronounced she looked “fine, I guess” on her way out the door, which she knows to be high praise from a 19-year-old boy, but the fact remains that she’s still about to attend her ex-boyfriend’s wedding.

A wedding that could have been hers.

And the fake boyfriend she’d procured is nowhere to be found.

Nancy takes a deep breath in preparation, and opens the door.

And gasps as it almost crashes into Jonathan, who jumps back just in time.

She blinks up at him in surprise.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” she says back, standing up, looking at him warily. “What are you doing here?”

He gives her a look. “Escorting my girlfriend into the wedding,” he says, like it’s obvious.

"I really feel like this is a time you should be taking pictures," she tells him, even as she feels a grin spreading across her face.

Jonathan lifts the camera, quickly, and Nancy hears the shutter click. "Happy?"

She nods. She is.

"That guy Tommy got into the after-ceremony champagne so they're trying to sober him up before it starts. They didn't want that documented, obviously, so I thought I'd see if you were here when I saw you sitting in the parking lot," Jonathan explains as they walk. He holds out his hand to her, and Nancy feels the ridge of the scar on his palm as she takes it, looking up at him.

She thinks about what Will had said, and grips his hand, tighter, which causes him to slow.

"What is it?"

Nancy thinks about thanking him again, or apologizing once more, or even confessing everything she's feeling, but as she looks through the open doors, at the people milling about, she falters.

It can wait.

Instead, she asks, "You're sure you want to do this?" because she feels like she has to, at this point, even as she thinks she knows what his answer will be.

"Stop asking me that," he says, an eyebrow raised, and they walk into the church, together.

5. but you'll never see the end of the road while you're traveling with me

It is, Nancy has to admit, a lovely wedding.

The flowers are tasteful, the bridesmaid dresses perhaps a bit ostentatious for her tastes, the ceremony perhaps a bit too long, but Tommy manages to hold it together, Robin is glowing, and Steve is . . . Steve.

She'd thought it would be harder, watching him up there, marrying another woman, but somehow Nancy gets through it with only a few moments of existential crisis. Hearing the words, "I, Stephen William Harrington," followed not by her own name, but rather, "Robin Elizabeth Owens," is perhaps the most jarring, but every time she feels her smile starting to slip, her eyes flick to Jonathan where he stands off to the side, and Nancy finds she's able to breathe once more.

She's one of the first to stand as they're pronounced husband and wife, clapping hard enough for her palms to sting, searching for the doubt she'd sought to resolve by coming back, and finds it missing. She smiles to herself, feeling sure, now, that everything is as it should be, and as she turns, she catches Jonathan's eye at the end of the aisle as he waits for Steve and Robin to pass.

He smiles back at her, then raises his camera once more.

She breathes out, surer than ever.

Nancy's at the table of mismatched cousins and old family friends, but she lets out a sigh of relief at whoever placed her there as she catches glimpses of Carol holding court at the high school table.

She makes awkward small talk with the cousins, pointing out Jonathan weaving through the tables when they ask where her *famous boyfriend* is, wishing he was sitting next to her, wishing that he didn't have a job to do even as she realizes that without said job they never would have met.

She answers every question of "How did you two meet?" with increasingly ridiculous answers—butcher, square dance lessons, fell into an open manhole.

There are toasts, first dances, dry chicken, which she chews halfheartedly until one of Steve's younger cousins asks her to dance. Nancy doesn't have the heart to turn him down.

They've barely stepped onto the dance floor, though, when there's a tap on her shoulder, and Nancy turns to find Steve standing behind her, hands in his pockets. He's clearly been dancing, and yet, somehow, there isn't a hair out of place. He smiles at her, at the cousin, tentatively.

"Mind if I cut in?"

Nancy returns his smile, even as her breath quickens. She turns apologetically to her partner, who shrugs and releases her into Steve's not quite embrace, as he holds her at a respectful distance and begins to sway.

She hears the snap of a shutter from behind her, and contemplates just how strange her life is; if anyone else in the world has ever had their current fake boyfriend take a picture of them dancing with their ex-boyfriend.

She thinks perhaps she's the only one.

"What's that look?" Steve asks, breaking into her thoughts.

Nancy shakes her head, checking over her shoulder for Jonathan, but he's already moved on. "I was wondering if this was the ex dance,"

she says. "Is Robin dancing with hers?"

He laughs. "I wasn't stupid enough to invite him, she's dancing with Tommy. Or actually, keeping him upright, if we're being honest."

Nancy knits her eyebrows together, musing over the first thing Steve had said. "Wait . . . so, if you vetoed Robin's ex, does that mean she was okay with you inviting me?"

Steve looks down, avoiding her questioning look. "I . . . didn't. Invite you, that is."

Nancy pulls back, feeling stung.

"It was my mom," Steve admits, making a face. "She wanted you to know, and since your parents moved she wasn't sure if you'd find out from them. I told her not to, but . . ." He shrugs, as Nancy frowns, about to be amazed by the pettiness, then remembers who she's dealing with, and is no longer surprised. "But then we got your RSVP card. She was pretty mad," he grins, "but," his eyes flick to hers, "I'm glad you came."

"Me too," she says, meaning it. There's a long pause, as they continue to sway with the music, her eyes staring into his. She takes a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," she tells him. "For . . . all the things I said back then. For . . . everything. It wasn't fair of me, you'd given up so much, I shouldn't have—"

"No, *I'm* sorry," he insists, cutting her off. "I should have listened to you, I . . . I shouldn't have just *assumed*. We should have—"

"We should have done lots of things," Nancy says, her gaze steady with his, and she can feel all of the hurt—the pain, the loss—ebbing away as they turn slowly on the dance floor. Already, Steve feels closer to a friend than someone she spent six years of her life with.

Steve nods, a thoughtful look on his face. "But everything worked out the way it should, right? I found Robin, and you . . . and Jonathan . . ."

“Oh, I—” she starts, blushing, but he keeps going.

“I mean, just from the way he was talking about you earlier, I could tell. He’s good for you. More than I ever was.”

“Wait, what?!” Nancy stops swaying, eyeing him warily. “You were talking about me?”

He shrugs again. “Just a little. Don’t *worry*,” he reassures her, “I didn’t say anything *bad*. I definitely didn’t tell him about the time you snuck out and we—”

“Don’t even *finish* that sentence, Steve Harrington,” she warns. “What did he say?”

“Sorry,” he says with a grin, pulling his hand from hers as the music changes. “Ex-boyfriend privilege. But I *can* tell you that his contract ends at 9, so I promise I won’t keep him from you for *too* long.”

“What did he *say*, Steve?”

“What?!” he calls across the dance floor, backing between dancing couples, putting his hand up to his ear. “I can’t hear you! I’ve got to go cut the cake!”

Nancy glares until he’s left her sight.

She’s tried to catch Jonathan all night (she vaguely remembers him telling her that weddings were “boring” and that he’d need someone to talk to, but he must have been lying for her benefit because she can’t find a single free moment to have a conversation), but she can’t seem to find him, so Nancy decides to address her second-most pressing need.

She’s in the middle of washing her hands when Carol stumbles into the bathroom. Nancy blinks, but says nothing.

“Nancy Wheeler,” Carol slurs, and Nancy wonders if it was just Tommy that got into the champagne or if Carol has just been catching up. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Hi, Carol,” she says, eyebrows raised, watching behind her in the mirror as Carol crashes her way into the stall, the door slamming behind her.

“Your boyfriend, he won’t stop taking pictures of me,” Carol says, muffled through the door.

Nancy looks heavenward, searching for the strength to deal with with drunk high school acquaintances, doesn’t find it. “That’s . . . literally the reason he’s here.”

“Or maybe he’s mad you were dancing with Steve and decided he wanted an upgrade.”

Her eyes roll. “Oh, *sure. That’s* it. And how would Tommy feel about that?”

There’s a long silence from behind the door. “That’s . . . whatever. Shut up. What I was *trying* to say is, I noticed *someone* walk out and *someone’s* car drive away the *second* you started dancing with Steve. Trouble in paradise?”

Nancy flinches. Carol’s lying, *obviously* she is, but to what end?

“Carol, we’re literally at his *wedding*, I’m pretty sure my boyfriend has absolutely no reason to worry about me dancing with Steve, regardless of our history, which, by the way, is none of your business.”

Carol makes a scoffing noise, and then goes on. “Well, *someone*, and by someone, I mean Tommy, heard him say something about breaking up with you as soon as the wedding was over. Maybe he got a head start.”

Nancy stops, frozen. She doesn’t know how Carol could know, who she could have heard Jonathan talking to, but it hits too close to the truth for her to feel comfortable, even as her heart sinks, knowing that his mind is already made up.

She realizes she's taken too long to respond, but unable to come up with a cutting reply, says something she's wanted to say for years, since high school.

"Fuck off, Carol."

There's a noise of outrage from behind the door, but Nancy's already gone.

Unfortunately, Carol seems to be right.

After three passes around the room, dodging dancers and bourbon-soaked uncles, and a quick glance outside, Nancy is forced to admit Jonathan is missing, as is his car.

Steve and Robin have also seemingly departed, honeymoon-bound.

Nancy wonders if that's why; with the object of their deception no longer a factor, Jonathan realized there was no reason to pretend anymore, and had removed himself from the situation. And with the knowledge that he'd been planning on the breakup immediately after the wedding, Nancy finds herself feeling like she did at the beginning of the weekend—despairing, uncertain, lost.

She didn't even get a chance to tell him how she really feels.

(She'd thought he might have felt the same way.)

Her chest is tight as she collapses into her seat, the cousins on the other side of the table only glancing up at her briefly before resuming their discussion over the uninvited black sheep aunt who caught the bouquet.

She stares at the table, wondering where she's going to sleep tonight,

if she'll ever see her things again.

Someone sits down next to her.

Nancy looks up.

"You don't want to know what I had to bribe the bartender with to get these, he kept saying he *wasn't allowed* to pour straight vodka, but I figured you've probably had enough time to recover from last night by now," Jonathan says, and slides a glass in front of her.

Nancy stares at him, speechless.

"Or I can get something else?" he asks, squinting at her lack of reaction.

"I thought you left," she says after a long pause, her throat dry.

He shakes his head. "I'm right here, and it's after nine, so I'm all yours, *darling*." He holds his glass up in a toast. "To the happy couple? I got some good shots of you dancing with Steve, by the way."

Nancy stays still, her glass untouched on the table, wondering if it's a dream, that if she moves he'll disappear. She can feel her heart start to unclench.

He frowns. "Is everything okay?"

"Carol saw your car leave," she states, still not moving.

He nods, matter-of-fact. "Will needed to borrow it, he stopped by a little while ago to get the keys. I figured I could get a ride home with you, and this way only one of us has to stop drink—"

She cuts him off with a kiss.

He doesn't let her down; as she's come to expect, he doesn't skip a beat. She struggles to keep from beaming, even as she can tell he's doing the same, and hope rushes through her. When she finally does lean back, she finds him looking at her out of the corner of his eyes, even as the smile lingers on his face.

“What was that for?”

Nancy presses her lips together, about to answer, when she notices the cousins have stopped their gossiping, and are, instead, staring at them surreptitiously, waiting, no doubt, for the next installment in the drama that is Steve’s wedding.

She picks up the glass, gulps down the vodka, and then holds out her hand to him.

“Do you want to dance?”

Nancy takes a few moments to just sway, basking in the feeling of being in Jonathan’s arms once more. She can’t help but compare it to her dance with Steve—an ending, a beginning.

Perhaps.

She feels like she’s standing on the edge of a precipice, her hope rekindled, but, just in case, she holds the moment deep in her heart, knowing that everything is about to change. For better, or for worse.

She takes a deep breath.

“I talked to Will,” he tells her, before she can say anything.

She blinks.

“He said . . . well, he said a lot of things. And then he asked when we were breaking up.”

“Oh,” Nancy says, softly.

“I said after the wedding.”

There’s something in his voice that makes Nancy tilt her head, watching him carefully as his gaze remains fixed somewhere over her shoulder.

“So—”

“But then I started thinking,” Jonathan says, cutting her off, his hand tightening slightly around where it rests on her waist. “What if . . . we didn’t? Break up.”

Nancy stops breathing.

“It’s just,” he starts, and she’s about to reassure him, to tell him that he’ll get no arguments from her, but afraid of breaking the spell, she stays silent, waiting, wishing.

“We’ve put six months of work into this relationship,” he says, tentative, and Nancy feels like her heart is about to burst. “It seems like a shame to break up now.”

He looks down at her, hopeful, and this time, Nancy can’t stop the smile that spreads across her face.

“Yes,” she says, her words belying the emotion she’s feeling. “Six months is a long time.”

He’s watching her carefully, and she can see the moment he realizes what she’s saying, what she means. There’s a light in his eyes, and she knows he can see the same one in hers—the relief, the joy, the hope.

When he leans in, and as he kisses her, Nancy keeps her eyes open, reading all the things left unsaid there. She can feel it, somewhere deep within her, a certainty. That despite everything, how they began, where they’re going, that this—her, him, *them*—is real.

As they sway, Nancy finds herself feeling fond of everyone, everything around her, even Tommy, wailing “Hey now, *hey now*,” at the top of his lungs, and she shakes her head, laughing to herself.

All she’d wanted was to close the door on one part of her life, to move on, to resolve things.

But instead another door has opened.

She looks up to find Jonathan watching her.

“What is it?” he asks.

Nancy shakes her head again. “Nothing.” She pauses, and reconsiders. “Everything.”

She smiles, and she doesn’t know if she’ll ever stop.

She’s still smiling, later, as she stands across from him in his room, the door shut, locked. She steps toward him.

He starts to laugh, almost to himself.

“What?” she asks, taking a step closer.

“My mom,” he says, holding his ground. “She warned me last night. The walls. They’re uh, pretty thin.” He’s smiling too, but it drops as she takes another step.

She is very close to him now.

“Let’s see how quiet you can be,” she says, and closes the distance between them.

6. epilogue: hey now, hey now

six months later

The snow is just starting to stick as Nancy unlocks Jonathan's apartment, knocking her shoes against the door frame to dislodge the slush clinging to her soles, calling, "Hi, are you back?" through the open door.

She hears him calling back to her, his words muffled, as she lets herself into the apartment's inviting warmth.

"I didn't catch that," she says, pitching her voice so he can hear her, tossing her keys into the bowl on the hall table, smiling wryly to herself as she catches sight of the picture frame that sits next to it; a diptych of two photographs, both from Steve's wedding. In the first, she's looking directly into the camera, a look of fresh exasperation on her face. In the second, her gaze is slightly up and to the side, and she looks giddy with happiness, beatific, almost. She'd rolled her eyes the first time she'd walked in to find it, the first thing anyone sees when they visit, but it also makes her feel warm, loved, in a way she can't put into words.

They'll need to find a new place for it.

"I said," Jonathan replies, leaning out of the bedroom, one hand on the door frame holding him upright. "Yes, I'm here."

Nancy raises her eyebrows, an unspoken *obviously* sent in his direction. "Hi," she says, instead, stepping over and kissing him quickly, before shrugging off her coat and gloves, laying them over the radiator to dry. "How was your flight? How was home?"

"Good," he says over his shoulder, as he ducks back into the bedroom. "We landed before the snow—I'll be out in a second, I just

want to finish unpacking. And home was fine, Mom says hi, by the way, although I told her she didn't need to, since you two actually talked on Thanksgiving—oh, and you'll love this—she wanted to know what we were doing for our anniversary.”

Nancy frowns, confused. “Our *what?*”

His head appears around the door frame once more, and he gives her a significant look. “Our *anniversary*. Our *year* anniversary.”

“Oh shit,” she says, realizing, and laughs, shaking her head. “It’s gone by so quickly. Feels like half the time.”

She can hear him laughing. “I said the same thing!”

“We can go out, if you want,” Nancy offers, not really meaning it, staring out the window as the snow falls outside, waiting for him to finish, her news becoming harder to contain with every passing moment.

“I don’t really feel like heading back out there,” he says, with a sigh. Nancy turns to find him standing in the doorway, hands in his pockets, smiling at her with eyebrows raised. “When are we celebrating our anniversary, anyway? Now? Or six months from now? We’re going to double date with Steve, remember?”

Nancy laughs, makes an *I don’t know* sound. “Not tonight, that’s for sure.” She pauses, waiting for him to head back into the bedroom, but he stays put. “Are you done?”

He nods. “Are you staying here tonight?”

She nods back, and then realizes that this is her opening. “Actually . . . about that . . .”

“About what?”

Nancy takes a moment to control herself, composing her face into some semblance of calm, willing her voice to stay nonchalant as she says, “Remember that conversation we had last week?”

“Which one? The one about how we have the same anniversary as

Steve or the one about us moving in together?”

She gives him a look. “The second one.”

“Then, yes.”

“Even though the apartment we looked at isn’t available anymore.”

“Even though,” he repeats, his voice tinged with regret, “the apartment—that *amazing* apartment, in the *perfect* location—isn’t available anymore. But yes—I haven’t changed my mind, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Nancy takes a deep breath. “What if that apartment *was* available?”

He looks at her sideways.

“So,” Nancy says, finally allowing the grin to spread across her face. “The agent called today, the landlady didn’t like the people who beat us out, I met with her this afternoon, and . . . it’s ours. If we want it.”

She waits for his reaction, watching him.

He doesn’t disappoint.

Jonathan steps forward, leading with his shoulder, his hands reaching for hers, kissing her firmly. She can feel her smile growing even wider, even as his does the same. She laughs, giddy.

“I love you,” he tells her, and Nancy leans her head back, looking up at him, fingers intertwining with his, her heart full. “Not just because, you know, you got us this dream apartment, but it doesn’t hurt. I don’t know how you did it, but somehow you just *make* things happen.”

“Like us dating,” she points out.

“Exactly,” he agrees.

Nancy grins even harder, squeezing his hands in hers, and starts to step back, asking, “So we do. Want it. Right?”

He doesn't answer, but instead, holds onto her tighter, keeping her from stepping away.

Nancy gives him a questioning look, even as he does the same. He lifts his right hand up—her left, his thumb brushing over the scar—and her stomach drops.

She'd left it on.

"At least I was *there* when I found out we were dating," he says dryly, staring at the ring she's wearing on the fourth finger of her left hand.

Nancy's mouth is open, and she stares at him for what feels like an eternity, before she remembers she has to explain.

"I—"

She's cut off by him walking away from her, saying "You should take that off," over his shoulder as he disappears into the bedroom.

Nancy holds her head in her hands, wincing. How could she be so *stupid*? She realizes she still hasn't said anything, and rushes after him. He's standing in front of his dresser, looking down, his jaw clenched, and her words start to come like a flood.

"No—it's not what—it was the landlady—the agent, when she called me today, she said the reason the last people didn't get it was because she's really old fashioned, and they were going to be living in sin, and I really wanted to make *sure* we got it and so I borrowed it from Kali downstairs, I just, after . . . y'know," she gestures vaguely behind her, into their past, "*everything*, I wouldn't think to—it was *just* for the apartment, and it *worked*, she really liked me, and I told her all about you . . ."

He turns around, his face still in the shadows.

"Look," she says, taking a tentative step closer to him. "I wouldn't . . . I know that with everything back then, and how we started . . . I know that you—"

"You should take that off," he repeats.

Nancy's heart sinks, even as she slides the ring off, leaving her finger bare.

Jonathan takes a step toward her, but he doesn't seem angry, and Nancy frowns in confusion.

"And maybe you should put this on instead?"

She watches as he holds something out, lifting it into the light.

It's smaller than the one that had been making its home on her finger. Old fashioned. Classic, even. But as he looks at her, holding the ring out like an offering, Nancy feels her breath catch, and her hand goes, instinctively, to her chest.

She can't speak.

Jonathan waits, watching her. He doesn't seem to see anything to give him pause, Nancy still too shocked to react, and takes another step forward, beginning to sink down onto one knee in the same movement.

"Nancy Wheeler—"

"Stop," she says quickly, finding her voice, grabbing him by the shoulders, pulling him back up before he can get all the way down, even as she finds herself not wanting him to stop at all. "What are you *doing*?"

He gives her a look. "I think it's pretty obvious—"

"This is *crazy*," Nancy tells him, her eyes wide. "We can't get *engaged*, we've only known each other *six months*."

"But we've been *dating* for a *year*," he reminds her.

Nancy throws a look back at him, pursing her lips to push her growing smile down. "That's . . ." She shakes her head, as he raises his eyebrows. "Okay, *fine*, but this is *still* crazy."

"Is it?" he asks, hearing the relenting in her voice.

“Yes!” she cries. “We were *just* talking about moving in together, and yes, *maybe also* how we said we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together made it seem like this should happen, but, we can’t . . . ” She trails off, casting around for another reason he shouldn’t continue, and unable to find one, protests once more, “It’s only been *six months* . . . ”

“You already said that.”

Nancy blinks at him helplessly, tears of joy pricking at the corner of her eyes, as he takes both of her hands in his.

“I’m not going to do the one knee thing, since you clearly don’t seem to want me to. But,” Jonathan continues, his eyes locked on hers, “Nancy Wheeler.”

He pauses, waiting for her to stop him once more, but Nancy doesn’t want him to, all she wants is for him to ask, and when no objection comes, her smile urges him on.

“Will you—”

“Yes,” she breathes, and kisses him.

Notes for the Chapter:

All titles from Crowded House's [Don't Dream It's Over](#).